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FROM AIT KAOHSIUNG BRANCH OFFICE

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SUBJECT: LEGISLATIVE ELECTION PREVIEW: THE VIEW FROM THE SOUTH

REF: A) Taipei 1387, B) Taipei 1470, C) Taipei 2501

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: With just four weeks to go before Taiwan's Legislative Yuan (LY) elections, the ruling DPP appears to have the upper hand in most districts of southern Taiwan, except for Taitung and Penghu Counties. With a halving of the legislature and a reduction in the size of most election districts, candidates are pursuing more locally-focused campaign strategies. Under the new election system, candidate constituency services, personal connections and local image count more heavily than party identification. The DPP has been campaigning on Taiwan identity issues, while the opposition KMT has focused on improving the economy. DPP presidential candidate Frank Hsieh, who has been concentrating his campaign in the pivotal central Taiwan region, has spent little time campaigning for LY candidates in the south. This contrasts markedly with KMT presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou, who has already visited all southern districts at least once to stump for LY candidates. End Summary.

¶2. (U) This cable is one of a series of reports on the political scene in important cities and counties in the run-up to the 2008 legislative and presidential elections.

DPP Has the Upper Hand in Southern Taiwan

¶3. (SBU) The ruling DPP and opposition KMT are competing head-to-head in southern Taiwan, widely regarded as a DPP stronghold, in the run up to the January 2008 legislative elections (refs A and B). Other parties are a minor factor, with only one candidate from the People's First Party (PFP) running in Kaohsiung County and two candidates from the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) running in Chiayi City. Local party officials and political observers have told AIT/K that the DPP is likely to win the majority of the LY seats in southern Taiwan. The KMT is expected to prevail in the single-seat districts of Taitung and Penghu Counties, where the races are tight. According to the press, President Chen Shui-bian reportedly predicted in an internal meeting that all the seats in Chiayi (two seats) and Tainan (three seats) Counties would go to the DPP candidates.

Wooing the Undecided and Youth Voters

¶14. (SBU) Most LY candidates are campaigning hard to woo support from undecided voters during the final weeks of the campaign period. KMT Tainan City Chairman Wu Chao-yu told AIT/K he is trying to woo the youth vote, piggybacking on presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou's appeal among young people. If the KMT can successfully mobilize young voters, its candidates may have a chance to win more LY seats in the south. DPP Tainan County Chairman Kuo Kuo-wen told AIT/K his party has reenergized core supporters by pushing the UN referendum. Kuo cited Tainan County Magistrate Su Huan-chih (DPP) as an example.

Although Su has criticized President Chen relentlessly over the last couple of years on his poor performance, he is now vigorously praising the President for raising the UN referendum as such a high profile issue.

Change of Campaign Strategy - Small Gatherings Prevail

¶15. (SBU) The campaign atmosphere ahead of the LY elections has been inordinately "cold" in southern Taiwan. Under the new "single-member district, two-vote" electoral system, the size of constituencies has shrunk, forcing candidates to adjust campaign strategies. Unlike the past, streets are not littered with campaign literature, and banners are not flying from every available light post. Instead of holding large, expensive, high profile rallies, candidates are campaigning personally door-to-door. Multiple small gatherings with family or social groups (e.g., community and professional associations), have become a more efficient and effective way for candidates to campaign. Since the small groups usually provide tea and refreshments, such gatherings also reduce campaign costs and keep charges of vote-buying at bay. As a result, incumbent legislators who provide extensive constituency services will have a better chance to win when running against non-incumbent challengers. For incumbents running against incumbents, the need for personalized campaigning is critical.

Where Is Frank Hsieh?

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¶16. (SBU) Without a doubt, presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou is the KMT's hottest campaign star on the LY campaign trail, having visited all southern districts (some more than once) to promote his policies and to support LY candidates. On the other hand, DPP presidential candidate Frank Hsieh seems to have disappeared altogether from the southern LY campaign scene. DPP Tainan County Chairman Kuo told AIT/K that some local DPP party leaders in the south have complained about not seeing Frank Hsieh campaigning for the legislative candidates. They note that President Chen, by contrast, shows up almost every week, causing many constituents to ask who is running for president. Kuo heard through party channels that Hsieh tried hard to avoid coming to Kaohsiung on November 17 for the LY campaign rally that followed the November 16 High Court verdict (reftel C) allowing Mayor Chen Chu to retain her seat. Kuo indicated that there must be coordination problems between Hsieh's camp and the DPP central office, and stressed it is unusual for the southern DPP campaign offices to be so out of touch with a high profile candidate's campaign headquarters. Taitung County DPP chairman Hsu Wen-hsien suggested that Hsieh's absence is not all bad. VIP visits, he said, just drain local resources and do not necessarily result in greater turnout at the polls. Hsu indicated it is obvious to him from press reports that Hsieh assumes he has the south in his back pocket and is therefore focused heavily on wooing central Taiwan voters, who will be key to deciding the outcome of the presidential election.

Election Issues

¶17. (SBU) As in previous elections, the KMT is making the state of Taiwan's economy its main campaign issue to highlight the poor performance of the ruling DPP. To counter the KMT, the DPP has been using Taiwan identity-related issues to keep the focus on more emotionally based issues that energize its base, appeal to many

Taiwanese, and put the KMT on the defensive. Central News Agency reporter Cheng Chi-fong told AIT/K that the DPP can still play the identity card because people can endure a bad economy but do not want to lose "national pride."

District Election Trends

¶18. (SBU) Kaohsiung City (5 seats): The DPP is expected to win three seats and is looking to win a fourth seat if a DPP maverick running in the third district can be talked into pulling out of the race. Most political officials, including from the KMT, indicated the DPP is likely to pull out a victory in the third district. The KMT is likely to win 2 seats and is campaigning hard to try to win a third seat.

¶19. (SBU) Kaohsiung County (4 seats): This is a DPP stronghold, where the DPP will win at least two seats. A third seat, which might have fallen easily to the DPP, may go to the KMT due to a maverick pan-Green candidate who could split the vote in the third district. The KMT is cooperating with the PFP in the first district by supporting a PFP incumbent legislator running under the KMT banner, who has a strong shot at a pan-Blue win in Kaohsiung County.

¶10. (SBU) Tainan City (2 seats) - It is likely that the DPP and KMT each will win one seat because the two KMT candidates are both incumbents and only one DPP candidate is an incumbent.

¶11. (SBU) Tainan County (3 seats) - The DPP is likely to win all three seats. If the KMT can pull out an unexpected win, it will take one seat for which it is running an incumbent who has served successfully for over ten years.

¶12. (SBU) Chiayi City (1 seat) - With a TSU candidate running in the race and a strong possibility of split in pan-Green votes, the KMT incumbent is likely to win the sole seat.

¶13. (SBU) Chiayi County (2 seats) - This is a DPP dominated area with a County Magistrate campaigning hard behind the scenes in this election. The DPP is likely to take both seats.

¶14. (SBU) Pingtung County (3 seats) - It is likely that the DPP will win at least two seats and the KMT will take one seat. The DPP would regard winning anything less than two seats as a defeat in Pingtung.

¶15. (SBU) Taitung County (1 seat) - The DPP did not nominate a party candidate because the KMT has long dominated the county. As a strategic countermove, however, the DPP recruited and is publicly

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and financially supporting a very popular former-KMT county councilor, turned maverick, to run in the LY election as a non-partisan in an attempt to split the KMT vote. The KMT incumbent is fighting a hard race this time, but it is likely the KMT will retain this seat.

¶16. (SBU) Penghu County (1 seat) - Although the KMT dominates this county, the KMT did not nominate a candidate, but supports the incumbent non-partisan legislator who is a former KMT member. In addition, a KMT maverick is running in this election, as well as a DPP candidate. The race could be very close and the DPP candidate may win due to his local popularity and because the KMT votes could split.

Comment

¶17. (SBU) The LY elections in southern Taiwan have taken a definite backseat to presidential election politics, with the main public spotlight focused on KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou and President Chen Shui-bian. The real competition for LY seats is taking place away from the public eye and the press, however. LY contenders are battling it out in family living rooms and small groups as they move throughout the grassroots, giving a more personal touch to their campaign efforts.

Thiele

Young